



PERSONAL NARRATIVES  
OF THE  
BATTLES OF THE REBELLION.  
BEING  
PAPERS READ BEFORE THE  
RHODE ISLAND SOLDIERS AND SAILORS  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

No. 9.

*“Quaeque ipse miserrima vidi,  
Et quorum pars magna fui.”*

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PERSONAL INCIDENTS  
IN THE EARLY CAMPAIGNS OF THE  
THIRD REGIMENT  
RHODE ISLAND VOLUNTEERS  
AND THE  
TENTH ARMY CORPS.

BY  
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[Read before the Society, May 3rd, 1876.]



MR. PRESIDENT AND COMRADES :

YOU will agree with me in thinking that an apology for the disconnected sketches thrown together in this paper, however much it may be needed, comes with poor grace from one who has nobody to blame but himself for his shortcomings. I will not apologize, therefore, but content myself with reminding you that my subject was announced a month ago in deference to a custom wisely established, but which I might well have departed from for two weighty reasons. One of these reasons is, that not only had I never written a single sketch of the incidents my title called for, but that I was pretty certain I had no papers giving dates or other

reminiscences of the events I wished to bring before you. The second is, that under the circumstances in which I knew myself placed, I could not command the time to look over old letters which might possibly aid me, or to consult any of the numerous histories of the war where some stimulant to fading recollection might be discovered.

Perhaps I ought to confess that I did turn the leaves of one of the latest of these histories to see what was thought worth printing about operations in which I was personally interested. You will judge what aid and comfort I derived from this investigation when I inform you, that while acknowledging the gallant and successful execution of a flank movement by soldiers from Rhode Island, the author forgets to give, if he must in charity be supposed to have known, the name of a single officer connected with that command. And yet, upon that little enterprise rests all my hopes of military fame ! Nay, the campaign, of which this was the crowning glory, comprised nearly all the services performed by the Third Rhode Island, as an infantry regiment. And such is fame. But I resist the temptation to

moralize on that fleeting theme. No doubt many of my hearers have had occasion to indulge themselves in remarks more or less pertinent to similar circumstances. They will the better appreciate my silence, and readily pass with me to the consideration of more tangible matters. Does anybody here ask himself how an old fellow like me, happened to get into military life? The question would be natural enough and easily answered. In one sense, it was a mere accident. Like other professional men, who are usually better known to the public than men in other pursuits, I could not be ignorant of the fact that my example in volunteering, would be appreciated by the State authorities. But I had a family who would be left wholly unprovided for, if I lost my life. Perhaps it was unmanly, but that thought alone kept me from enlisting at the first call. When the demand for volunteers became more urgent, and the Governor complained that the men he would select for officers, did not come forward, I felt it a duty to say to him, "They will come if you bid them come." To his question whether that meant that I would accept a subordinate position, if invited,



but one answer could be returned. The result was the tender of a commission as major in the Third Regiment, then nearly complete, actually organized by the efficient Lieutenant-Colonel Christopher Blanding, but under the nominal command of an army officer, Colonel Eddy, who never accepted the position.

The Third Regiment was raised in the summer of 1861, while the public mind was still wrought up to the intensity of feeling created by the disaster at Bull Run. Its organization was in many respects peculiar, and the rather public display of reckless conduct on the part of both officers and enlisted men at the outset, gave it an unfortunate name and an undeserved reputation. It is needless, before a Rhode Island audience, to say that the regiment now needs no vindication. No man ever regretted his connection with it. The large element of foreign blood, which was dreaded as a source of weakness, proved to be the sure foundation of its strength. A chapter of exceeding interest to us who still cling so closely to our prejudices against foreign birth, might be written in this connection. But I forbear. I

shall surely wander far enough from personal incidents before I reach the close of my paper, without vaunting the gallantry and patriotism of my Irish, English and German comrades.

One of the early misfortunes of the Third, was its failure to be incorporated into the army set apart for operations under General Burnside. We felt as if it was a sort of favoritism which lost us the opportunity given to the Fourth and Fifth Regiments, and that feeling gave a tone to all regimental criticisms for a considerable period, until we had learned to appreciate the character of the commander who organized and led what was styled, I believe, the "Expeditionary Corps." General Sherman, true to his Rhode Island birth and training, and with a firm faith in Rhode Island pluck and character, at once devoted our regiment to a special service, and gave it a remarkably independent position. To be sure, this rendered necessary the transformation of the regiment from an infantry to a heavy artillery organization, and in the end belittled the importance of its regimental officers. But for this there was compensation in the magnitude of the command and

especially in the multitude of its officers,—a circumstance of no slight importance when the system of promotion from the ranks became so happily established.

I have sometimes thought that full justice has not been done to General Thomas W. Sherman. His name is overshadowed by that of his great namesake. He did not possess the qualities or exhibit the manners which easily command popularity. In fact, he often seemed to prefer an ill-natured criticism to a flattering compliment from a newspaper correspondent. A long and perhaps hard experience in the army, had taught him to yield obedience, absolute and unhesitating, and when put in power, he rigorously exacted such obedience from others. The immediate result was, of course, unlimited grumbling from volunteers, as yet wholly unacquainted with discipline. But he was an admirable soldier, familiar with every detail of a soldier's duty, and capable of instructing others in the discharge of their duty, however important or however trivial, and such instruction he never failed to give to any who had the sense to seek and to accept it. Vigor-

ous in enforcing regard for authority, he never overlooked preparation for the care and comfort of his men, nor spared the officer who neglected those under his command. His staff, with the single exception of his medical director, I believe, was composed of very young men. Undoubtedly, he taxed their activity and energy to the utmost, and made small allowance for their inexperience. Many a story can be told of him to illustrate this. But the result was that his work was all well done, and no headquarters throughout the army, probably, had a higher or better deserved reputation for ability and efficiency. It hardly needs to be added that under the training of such a commander, raw recruits rapidly attained proficiency in drill and something of that discipline which distinguishes soldiers from militia. And yet, General Sherman had won no great success on the southern coast. In co-operation with the navy, he took possession of all the islands and held the approaches to all the available harbors south of Charleston; but for this a force of five thousand ought to have been as effective as fifteen thousand. Charleston was what we wanted, and I

thought when we landed on Hilton Head, that the men we had, could march into Charleston. I think so now. I suppose General Sherman thought so, and never doubted he would have been in Charleston before Christmas, 1861, if his superior at the head of the Army of the Potomac, or at the War Office, had consented.

So thinking, as a Rhode Islander, I for one was not disposed to admire the wisdom that led to his removal from his high command. Certainly, the order at best was ill timed. The skillful plans for the siege and reduction of Fort Pulaski had all been arranged under his direction, and were ripe for successful execution. It was an insult to as good a soldier and as true a patriot as the nation can boast, which was consummated when he was deprived of the opportunity of witnessing and rejoicing in the downfall of that important fortress.

It chanced, however, that those of us who had spent the winter in idleness at Hilton Head, welcomed any change which promised occupation. A new general meant, of course, new demonstrations, new expeditions, and rumor had it that his chief of

staff was to be not only actual commander of the forces in the field, but a fighting man. No sooner, therefore, was the reduction of Pulaski complete, and the troops once more disengaged, than movements were set on foot of which no one knew the object, but every one guessed they meant nothing less than the capture of Charleston.

I don't know as you will believe it, comrades, though I do say it — it is a weakness often noticed among Rhode Island veterans, this want of implicit faith in their fellow man; I don't marvel at it; not at all; I respect the feeling — still, I tell you the truth. I am not proud. You think the laugh comes in here? By no means. The place for that is further on, as I will proceed at once to show you. Our regiment was commanded — that's the word, — commanded — by one of the best soldiers Rhode Island sent to do her honor. Nathaniel W Brown was not a colonel merely, he was a commander. He was my good friend before and after we served together, but like others, both wise and able and just according to their light, he thought a friend could be as serviceable to him and to the regiment, in the third as in

the second position. And so he named a lieutenant colonel who had held command and seen service already, secured his appointment at the expense of his inexperienced major, and with his consent, because, as I said, and as you know, that major was not proud. And while we are thinking of it, what had a major to be proud of, who took his commission in August, and for ten months had been waiting for a chance to be shot at? I remember now, in communications somewhat freely written to the executive authorities at home, offering pretty zealously I think, at times, to prove that I was not proud, and to exchange my rank for that of captain of a light battery. I wonder if those letters were preserved. I shouldn't wonder if the "little War-Governor" thought that majors would be poor stuff to make battery commanders of. On the whole, I should agree with him.

Speaking of the Governor, reminds me that I owe to him one of the most pleasing and exciting incidents of the war,—my personal introduction to the Army of the Potomac before Yorktown. How much I was impressed with its pomp, its magnitude,

its power, its inefficiency for the work it was then undertaking, this is no time to say. Accepted as a volunteer staff officer, to aid in hastening to the front artillery and ordnance stores, I saw enough to satisfy me that if that arm of the service had been handled in that way in the Department of the South, court martials would have been speedy and vacancies numerous in the Third Rhode Island. But this is vicious scandal, and I beg pardon of my more fortunate comrades who love and honor their old commander. And I ought to thank him for giving me the opportunity,—think of it, my friends,—six months and more in service and this my first opportunity to hear the music of a rifle ball. Sometimes since then, I've doubted its musical character. That day I visited the advanced posts before Yorktown, I was bound to believe in it. There were governors and generals and dignitaries of all grades, accustomed, or pretending to be accustomed, to those insinuating tones. Is it conceivable that a stray major from the south, generously supposed to be familiar with no projectile smaller than an eight-inch shell or a thirty-pounder parrot, would fail to



enjoy the "Sharpshooters' Serenade." Doubt it, if you will. But in all seriousness, I assure you, that idle exposure of life was worth to me all the experience of all the weary months in camp and garrison, and all the lessons I had taken or given in the discipline of a soldier.

This little episode was over, and the senior major of the Third Regiment was diligently killing time with the help of two juniors, in their pleasant sandy entrenchments at Hilton Head, before General Hunter planned his advance upon Charleston. How well I remember the day it was announced to my colonel by the Post Commander, who was to go in command of a brigade, of which six companies of the Third were to form an infantry battalion, the other companies being detained as garrisons at the various posts, where their services as artillery were indispensable. How hard it was to convince Colonel Brown that his battalion must go without him, and he be content to take command of the post at Hilton Head! And then came the announcement that made me the proudest man in all that army. The major at last had a command. Six companies and a junior major! Yes, I was very proud, and not altogether without

reason. I have seen many a colonel who would have been glad to exchange his entire regiment for that battalion, and have done a good deal smarter thing at that, than most colonels ever did.

If you will fancy a brigade encamped in such pleasant spots as each detachment had been fortunate enough to discover on landing upon the little island of Edisto, let me introduce you to what, strange as it may seem to you, well drilled infantry officers, I may properly style the first personal incident of the campaign ;—you would never guess what it was, and only out of politeness to me, believe it when you are told. My friends, it was only my first battalion drill ; yes, it was not only my first introduction of myself to my officers and men, their first chance of learning my voice and my ways, but it was absolutely my first opportunity to test my little stock of knowledge gained from books, and to apply the few hints I had obtained from others. That same battalion drill is pretty amusement. I have spent odd hours at it since, agreeably and profitably to myself and others. But if you think it was a pleasant incident in my first experience as commander, you are

sadly mistaken. Recollect what was my responsibility, and what my time for preparation! Four or five hundred men, whose conduct and safety depended in good degree upon my ability to lead and direct them, and three or four days at most in which to teach them how I proposed to do it, and to show them that I had such knowledge, coolness, promptness, decision and authority, as to challenge their confidence and induce them to follow me as a leader whom they could not desert without disgrace. I suppose military drill and discipline means something like that, does it not? At any rate, I felt so then, and have never been ashamed of the feeling. The drill was far from a brilliant success, I am quite sure. Nor were the movements when repeated shortly after in presence of an enemy, altogether precise. I have seen them more handsomely executed by home guards. In fact, guides were not regularly posted, nor the alignments by any means perfect, as I now remember, but they served their purpose. The proper commands were given and promptly obeyed. The purpose of those battalion drills, and of all drills and discipline, as I under-

stand it, was answered. I thank God for that little resting spell on Edisto Island — that campaign incident as I have ventured to term it. Had one of those four or five hundred men come to harm because I had failed to teach him the tone of voice, the word of command, on which his safety and that of others might depend in the hour of danger, how should I have ever dared to stand up before him or his comrades and pretend to be their officer and leader? Unfortunately, I can make no such pretensions. But my few opportunities enabled me to honor those who justly may. I understand with what manly pride an officer, knowing himself and his men,—his look and voice and being known to every one of them,—with what pride and joy such an officer leads his men into danger,—nay, if it must be, unto death.

Another incident of this campaign I regret my inability to present as I had hoped and intended to do. It is one never likely to be forgotten by the thousands who took part in it, but I find it impossible to make it life-like and real without some assistance in recalling surrounding circumstances, and in

ntroducing individual traits of character But I must make the attempt, however poorly I am likely to succeed. It was on our march across John's Island. Through somebody's blunder, there was a scarcity of transports adapted to the shallow waters in those parts, and the troops were collected at a point supposed to be beyond the enemy's observation, preparatory to a forced march to the scene of military operations on James Island. Here, after a halt and preparations for a night's bivouac, occurred one of those mistakes, which, however harmless to others, I suppose no man ever really forgives himself for committing. I received a sudden summons to get my command into line, and foolishly supposing it was to be in marching order, I wasted two or three minutes in strapping knapsacks and blankets. Judge of my feelings when, taking my place in line, I found that nothing was going on except a review, and that a regiment whose colonel was sharp enough to suspect it, had preceded me, and thus obtained the right of the line for the midnight march that was to follow. It was small consolation to know that the brigade commander had a liking for the Rhode

Island boys and wished them at the head of the column. You may believe my positive assertion that the Third Rhode Island never played second again.

If I could only describe that midnight march! You all see that that is the effective incident I am so anxious to bring out into full view, and have no words to do it with. You understand that it had been timed so that the column should reach the landing, be ferried over to James Island, effect a junction with other troops arriving by water, and before daybreak advance upon the works of an enemy surprised and unable to resist. Then, a short, victorious march to Charleston, and the whole sea coast is ours! How simple, easy, natural—how well contrived, how impossible to fail! Alas! no; success was very certain—if it should not rain, and it did rain. In June, rains will come in South Carolina and when they come, men's plans always fail if they won't stand drowning. My horse did not drown, perhaps because he was born to be shot. I stand a good deal of drowning myself, having tried it in early childhood and made a failure of it even then, and my men would have been ashamed to do anything

but follow me that night. How the water did pour ! how the road deepened and lengthened, until a march that would without fatigue have ended long before daybreak, was not over at nine o'clock in the morning. And when it was over, and we all snugly quartered in the church, houses and barns of a deserted village, the failure of the well contrived plan of operations was the last thing we thought of. Indeed, that was not a matter of the slightest importance to us just then.

Do you understand what had happened? Something that history tells us too little of, but that ought to be put into history, and repeated, until no soldier of the future shall have excuse for forgetting it. What had happened was simply this — our entire little army was foundered. It had marched itself off its feet, or to put it more truthfully, had marched its feet off. 'Twas only five or six miles, but in that rain it was enough. Do you know, any of you, what this means? 'Tis very pitiful. I saw the hardest in my command, proud, self-reliant officers and men, sit down and cry like children while they cut off their shoes, and then dragged

themselves along to shelter. The very heart had gone out of them in that short march. Had an enemy come upon them, they had fallen almost without resistance. Nor was it possible for them to move again until three days of careful nursing and a general distribution of new shoes, put them once more in marching order.

This is the incident which led to the occupation of that peaceful village of Legareville, of which some of you may have heard. Thanks to the rebel affection for themselves and their property, we had roofs over our heads. Battalion headquarters, I remember, were sumptuously supplied with a bedstead, condemned as unfit for firewood and held together by the sharpest bed cord I ever made acquaintance with, upon which the commanding officer was compelled to sleep, because his staff were too proud to sleep on the floor or to let him do so. And then the church! how naturally good Yankee citizens seemed to take to sacrilege, if the way they crowded pulpit and pews alike, was sacrilegious! I take none of the discredit for these peccadilloes to myself. Rather do I apologise to our worthy cabinet keeper,



for rejecting the spoil of a neighboring planter's house, kindly presented to me by my contraband servant, who then and always maintained the dignity of the headquarters by earning the reputation of being the best and boldest forager in the command.

One more incident lingers in my memory, and with its recital I will hasten to conclude my paper. Our period of rest after the disastrous night march just described, terminated late a pleasant Sunday afternoon in June, when we accompanied our brigade commander across the Stono River to James Island. Landing at dusk, we received an order to proceed at once into an adjacent forest and relieve a regiment doing picket and outpost duty. Darkness steps in so quickly in that region, that I hurried forward the head of my column and went to the rear on foot to see that the companies closed up and followed as soon as landed. It was not altogether a success. Belated movements on new ground are quite apt to prove unsatisfactory to some of the parties concerned. In this instance, the misfortune befel one of my best officers, then recently promoted, and not only a general favorite but a perfect model in the

way of literal obedience to orders. Making my way to the front as rapidly as possible, I came by the head of his company just in time to see that, owing probably to the fading light, he had slightly missed the direction and was not closely following the column, and at the same instant to hear from our brigadier the ominous words, "Report yourself in arrest at once, sir." How those words cut him, I knew well enough, and though the blunder was forgiven and forgotten next morning, he was the unhappiest man in the department for many a day. He might have considered himself, as the rest of us did, a lucky fellow for escaping our miserable plight that night. But I suppose any officer worthy the name, would prefer the chance of being shot to an arrest in presence of his men, even though for nothing more serious than an imaginary offense. Without further interference or other obstacle than the increasing darkness, we reached the woods and relieved our friends. I say friends, because they could not have been rebels, since they retired in the direction from which we had come. But their voices we did not know, and their faces we could not see.

They managed in the utter darkness, how I never quite comprehended, to lead squads of our men to the picket stations they had occupied, and hastily retreated to such supper and lodgings as they might haply find at a more convenient distance from the enemy. That is, if there were any enemy. Not the remotest idea had any one of us, whether there was an enemy within miles of us, or in what direction to look for him if there was one. A visit or two to the outposts developed the pleasing certainty that firing from one would be pretty certain to endanger the other. But this consideration did not seem of much importance when the night became so black that nothing could be seen, not even an object in motion, much less a man's face, or his musket. Then came a rain that filled a musket barrel before a sergeant could go along his squad and see the arms were secured. And the battalion commander began to reflect, rather late, what was he to do with all of his men huddled together in that thick wood, if an enemy who knew the ground, should make an attack. Wasn't that a pleasant reflection for a man making his first tour of picket duty, and certain of only one

thing, that he was exposing to possible danger three or four times as many men as could be of any use, and at the same time so blinded by rain and darkness as to feel actually incapable of marching any part of his force to a place of greater security

Relief came from an unexpected quarter. An enemy approached one of the outposts, was challenged, and fired, wounding one brave fellow, a sturdy old sergeant in the British army, and then my men played militiamen and fired into the air, and kept on firing until I have no doubt they started the long roll in every rebel camp south of Charleston. I have laughed to myself a thousand times since at the supreme folly of that firing. My superior laughed at it the next morning, and commended our good behavior,—heaven save the mark. I felt then as if I deserved to be cashiered for a fool, and privately, I must say, I feel very much the same now.

And yet, I wonder to this day, not so much how the firing started and kept up, as how I succeeded in stopping it at all. The noise and the little excitement such noise so naturally produces, were exceedingly refreshing. It seemed to drive away the de-

pression and stupidity caused by the darkness and wet, and the flashes of the powder lighted up faces around you for an instant and so brought back the reality of human companionship once more. I don't know as I asked myself whether I was or had been nervous and frightened, but I recollect very well of thinking that none of my officers or men were so affected, and of rejoicing in that thought.

Somehow I stopped that firing, or rather perhaps it stopped of itself, though I seem to have a recollection of shouting to stop it. Then came the sad news that poor Brophy was wounded, and with the necessity for removing him came energy enough to assume the responsibility of withdrawing the outposts. The entire force was at the same time drawn up until daylight in a position apparently quite as certain to prevent the advance of an enemy, and more secure from attack if one were attempted. Shall I confess that but for the tragic ending of this farcical midnight engagement, in the death of our wounded comrade a few days afterwards, a death due to want of care and skill at the hospital to which he was sent, possibly, rather than

his wound, I should very likely have come to the conclusion that no enemy approached us that night, and that the whole disturbance was caused by a careless discharge of a musket by one of our own men. But I don't want to have his death laid to the charge of any one of us, and so I must stick to the story as it was first told and believed around the camp fires of the Third.

Or was it never told? It occurs to me now that of all the number whom I have greeted since the war was over, not one has ever reminded me of that villainous firing. Perhaps they have their version of it, in which the present writer figures in even a worse light than here presented. I shall not stop to ask. Whatever they may have thought of their major that night or on any previous occasion, if it was to his discredit, I am sure they forgave it and forgot it a few days later, when together they faced death at the battle of James Island.

And now that I have performed my allotted task, let me hope that you, Mr. President and comrades, will join with me in saying that the apology with which I had thought of introducing myself this

evening, would have been out of place. Not that I thus boldly ask a compliment for what I have written. My meaning is something very different from that; you all understand it so. My personal reminiscences are trivial in themselves, of little permanent interest to myself, of no interest to any one else. I have spent an evening in reducing them into form, not because they have either interest or value, but because I want the right to urge others to give us something out of their store of personal incidents, which I know and you know, and all of our comrades ought to know and feel, will be alike interesting and valuable, not only to us, but to the great public who will some day enjoy the fruits of our labors.

There are hundreds of thrilling incidents connected with the great battlefields of the war,—Bull Run, Fredericksburg, Antietam, Gettysburg, and a dozen more,—which can be related nowhere better, more touchingly or eloquently than in such papers as comrades now living in Rhode Island can prepare. I think they owe it to the state, the nation, to us and to themselves, to make the attempt.

Rhetorical finish is of no consequence. The historian of the future will give that at his pleasure. All that is wanted now, is facts and the impressions those facts made at the time upon the mind of the writer. I have heard such papers read here and in posts of the Grand Army of the Republic as to me were more attractive than the most exciting romance. What is true of myself in this regard, I believe is true of very many others. And to add what influence my example may possibly have, has been my only excuse for inflicting upon you what is so trivial and commonplace as the sketches I have given necessarily are.





